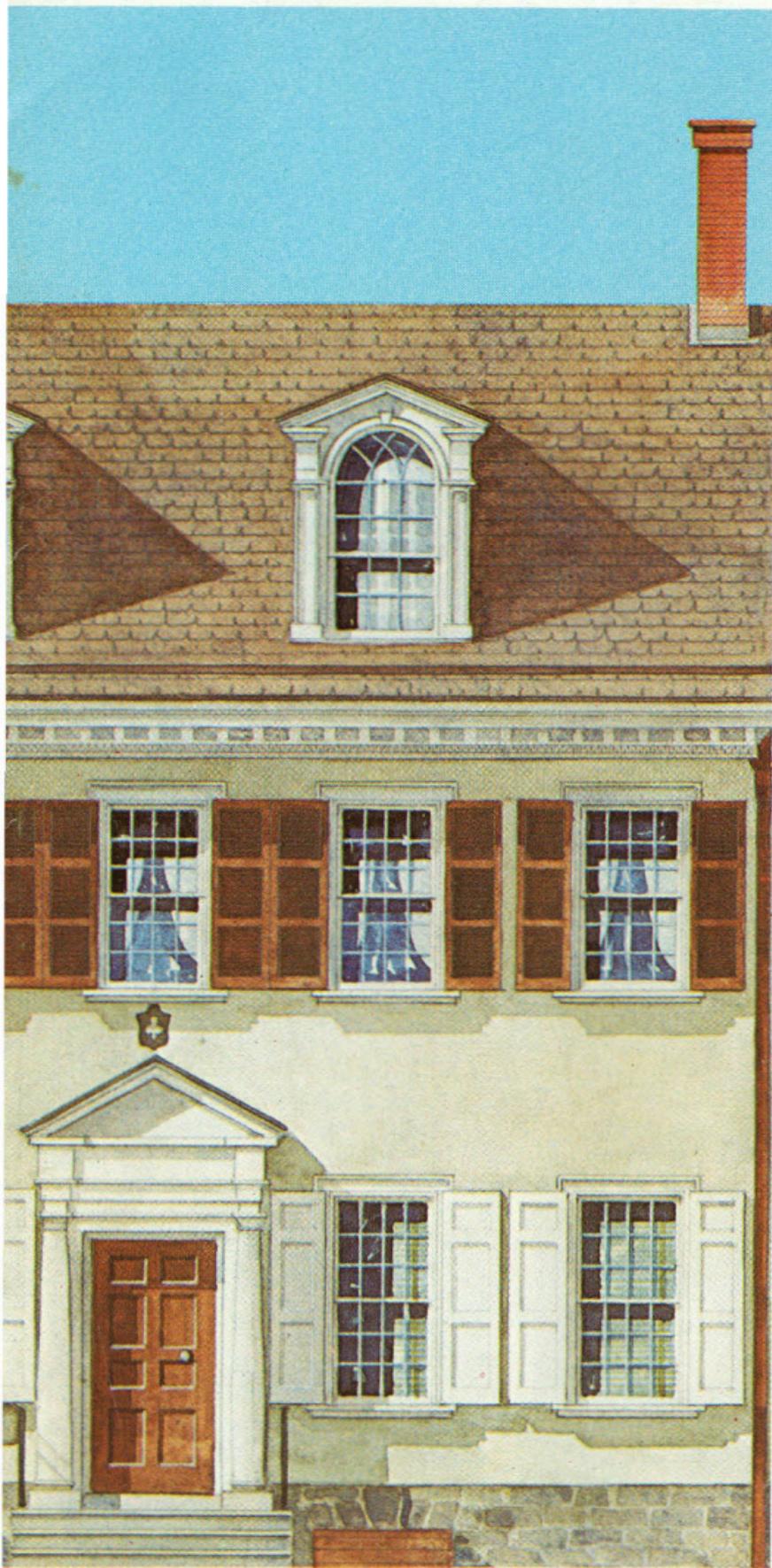
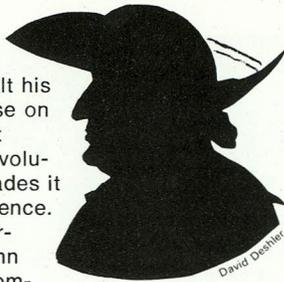


# Deshler-Morris House



Part of Independence  
National Historical Park, Pennsylvania

David Deshler (1712-1792), a Philadelphia Quaker merchant, built his handsome stone house on Germantown's Market Square before the Revolution, and for two decades it was his country residence. After the battle of Germantown in the autumn of 1777, the British commander, Sir William Howe, briefly made his headquarters in the building. President George Washington leased the house in 1793 to escape a yellow fever epidemic raging in Philadelphia and met here with the heads of the government departments. He presided over a divided and strongly partisan cabinet, as he deliberated the great issues of the day. The following year Washington returned with his family to spend a few summer months in Germantown's pleasant surroundings.



### David Deshler's Elegant House

Germantown was 70 years in the making when David Deshler in 1752 chose an "airy, high situation, commanding an agreeable prospect of the adjoining country" for his new residence. The site lay in the center of a straggling village whose German-speaking inhabitants combined farming with handicraft for a livelihood. For decades the town had enjoyed a reputation conferred by the civilizing influence of Christopher Sower's German-language press, and by its excellent schools.

Germantown's pleasant location near fast-growing Philadelphia, had long attracted families of means. One person advertised that his house would satisfy "any West Indian [planter] or other gentleman for a pleasant, healthy, and commodious Country Seat."

The main street was a locale already well-known to Deshler. An immigrant from the German state of Baden, Deshler came to America in 1733 soon after his graduation from the University of Heidelberg to join the mercantile firm of his uncle, John Wister. He frequently visited Wister's "Big House," now known as Grumblethorpe (1744), a scant two blocks from the site he chose as his own. Deshler married Mary LeFevre of Lancaster and the couple had three surviving daughters, Mary, Esther, and Catherine. Looking to the future, he purchased a strip of land on main street in 1752 and later an adjoining strip, for a total of 2 acres with a 100-foot frontage.

Deshler was then 40 years old, with 20 prosperous business years behind him. The reputation that he acquired in his store on Philadelphia's High Street inspired a local saying, "as honest as David Deshler." A leading shopkeeper, he signed the Non-Importation Agreement in 1765 and was named to a committee of enforcement.

Deshler began constructing his house in the 1750s, adding what is now the large front section in 1772. When Samuel Wetherill, an insurance surveyor, looked it over early in 1774, he described it as "Quite New." Deshler had built a minor masterpiece of Georgian architecture, which was "finished in the most elegant manner." The grounds were "in complete order, with convenient back buildings . . . a stable and chair house [small carriage house], and a pump in the yard. The lot [contains] a great variety of the best grafted fruit trees, a large garden inclosed with pails."

### William Howe's Headquarters

The new part of the Deshler's house was little more than 3 years old when war came to Germantown. Lt. Gen. William Howe took Philadelphia on September 26, 1777, and followed the Continental Army as it withdrew northwest of the city. The pursuit ended at Germantown, where Howe encamped on October 2. Two days later, in a surprise movement, Washington's

regiments, with a determination not shown earlier, swept down on the unprepared British. In a wild fight, the Americans pressed the British lines back almost to Market Street before Howe, riding up in haste from his quarters, could rally the hard-pressed redcoats. The disorganized Americans soon retreated, and Howe moved into Deshler's house.

Washington gave the now tense British formations no peace. For 2 weeks his repeated forays disturbed their rest, and Howe admitted that the regulars had become edgy.

On October 19 Howe ended the suspense and ordered his tired army back to Philadelphia. He left the house when the scene of war shifted to the south, leaving it to the Deshler family again. David Deshler died in March 1792, and a few months later the house was purchased by Col. Isaac Franks, a Philadelphia broker, and a veteran of the Continental Army.

### "A Contagious and Mortal Fever . . ."

In 1790 the Federal Government moved from New York to Philadelphia for the final session of the First Congress under the Constitution. To an already overflowing commercial metropolis and state capital were added the offices of the Federal government. A colony of diplomats and assorted petitioners of Congress pressed their business in the city.

Late in the summer of 1793 yellow fever struck, putting a "strange and melancholy . . . mask on the once carefree face of a thriving city." Fortunately, Congress was out of session. The Supreme Court met for a single day in August and adjourned without trying a case of importance. The executive branch stayed in town only through the first days of September. Secretary of State Thomas Jefferson described what happened next:

**A contagious & mortal fever . . . is driving us all away. . . Col. Hamilton is ill of it . . . the President set out for Mount Vernon yesterday . . . Gen. Knox is setting out for Massachusetts, & I think to go to Virginia in some days. when and where we shall reassemble will depend on the course of this malady.**

President Washington, watching the progress of events from Mount Vernon, decided to return in late October, if not with safety to the city, then to Germantown. He asked Attorney General Edmund Randolph to rent a house for him there and gave "notice to the heads of departments . . . requesting their attendance." Randolph suggested three houses, one of them Franks', which Washington chose because it was "more commodious for myself and the entertainment of company."



### **"I Have Taken A House In Germantown"**

The President arrived as scheduled on November 1, the date set for the Cabinet to assemble. But when he found that arrangements with Franks were not yet complete, he accepted temporary accommodations elsewhere. Finally on November 16, 1793, Washington moved into Franks' house. Between November 16 and 30 Washington held four cabinet meetings in Franks' house. The discussions concerned issues raised by the war between Great Britain and France, this country's ally during the Revolution. Ever since Washington had proclaimed American neutrality in that conflict, there had been problems with the aggressive French minister plenipotentiary, Edmond C. Genet. The convening of Congress in 2 weeks also demanded attention.

"At present I am occupied in collecting and arranging the materials for my communications to Congress," wrote Washington in late November. This address to Congress, his fifth annual, was the most complex and tedious he had yet prepared. The secretaries all proposed important subjects that they wished covered. Knox dusted off a perennial favorite which he had advocated since 1779: the establishment of a military academy. Jefferson "objected that none of the specified powers given by the const[itutio]n to Congress would authorize this," and Washington "did not want to bring on anything which might generate heat & ill humor."

The President had a good reason for soothing Congress, for he had encountered strong opposition to his proclamation of neutrality. Many Congressmen regarded the proclamation as an usurpation of authority and as an infringement upon Congress' power to declare war. Washington understandably wanted to present his action in the best possible light. To Randolph, draftsman of the proclamation, he gave the task of preparing his message. Randolph's draft was one of the first matters discussed in the November 18 cabinet meeting, and it produced much controversy.

Throughout the November 21st meeting, the Cabinet remained divided on the classic issue of the proper way to interpret the Constitution. Alexander Hamilton maintained "with great positiveness" that since the Constitution granted to the President and the Senate the right to make treaties, "they might make a treaty of neutrality which would take from Congress the right to declare war in that particular case." Jefferson in his turn insisted that the Constitution only authorized the President and Senate "to carry into effect by way of treaty any powers they might constitutionally exercise." He acknowledged weaknesses in both positions, but believed in a narrow interpretation rather than one so broad that it would "enable the executive and senate to do things which the const[itu]tio[n] forbid[s]."

When the meeting closed, Washington was still uncommitted. The direct and vigorous tone of his address, as penned in Franks' house and read before Congress on December 3, reflects his own judgment:

**In this posture of affairs, both new and delicate, I resolved to adopt general rules which should conform to the treaties [concluded in wartime with France] and assert the privileges of the United States. It rests with the wisdom of Congress to correct, improve, or enforce this plan of procedure.**

The cabinet meeting on the 28th took up passages dealing with defense and messages to Congress on relations with Great Britain and France. On the troublesome business of Genet—who in defiance of the President had armed and equipped privateers in American ports and openly courted Congress and the people—the

Cabinet divided again. Hamilton demanded that Genet be cut adrift, while Jefferson feared France's reaction and counseled going slow. Randolph had the final say. He observed drily that Genet "at present . . . was dead in the public opinion, if we should but leave him so."

George Washington found Colonel Franks' house both a comfortable residence and a suitable place to receive and entertain the Cabinet, which probably met in the large room to the left of the entrance. The two dinners that the President gave for the Cabinet, on the 18th and the 28th, would have been served in the room across the hall, where Mrs. Franks kept a 72-piece set of Nanking china. Washington had come to Germantown with only his private secretary and two servants, but once there he hired enough staff to take care of his guests.

For his hours of poring over state papers, Washington had the small room on the second floor that adjoined the large bedchamber. The only writing desk in the house was located here.

By the end of November the yellow fever epidemic had abated. "I spend part of my time in the City," Washington wrote a correspondent on November 24. Intending to remain at Franks' only "until Congress get themselves fixed," Washington moved back into Philadelphia on November 30.

The following year, the President wrote: "My public avocations will not . . . admit of more than a flying trip to Mount Vernon for a few days this Summer; this not suiting Mrs. Washington I have taken a house in Germantown to avoid the heat of the City in the months of July and August." The Washingtons moved to Germantown on July 30, 1774 with their adopted children, Eleanor Parke Custis and George Washington Parke Custis, followed by two loads of furniture from the Presidential mansion in Philadelphia. The family attended the German Reformed Church across the square, and Washington found time to pose for a portrait by Gilbert Stuart. On September 20 the change of seasons allowed the Washingtons to return to Philadelphia.

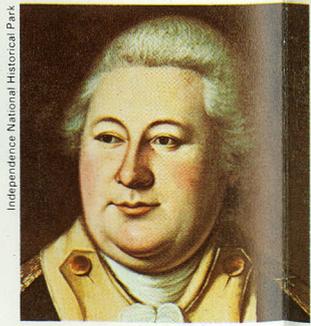
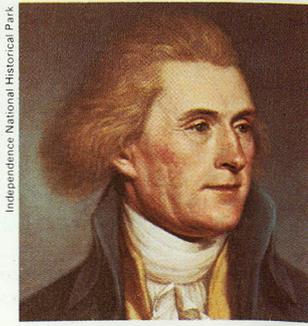
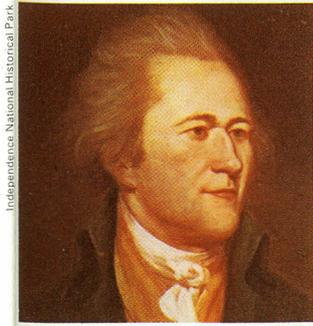
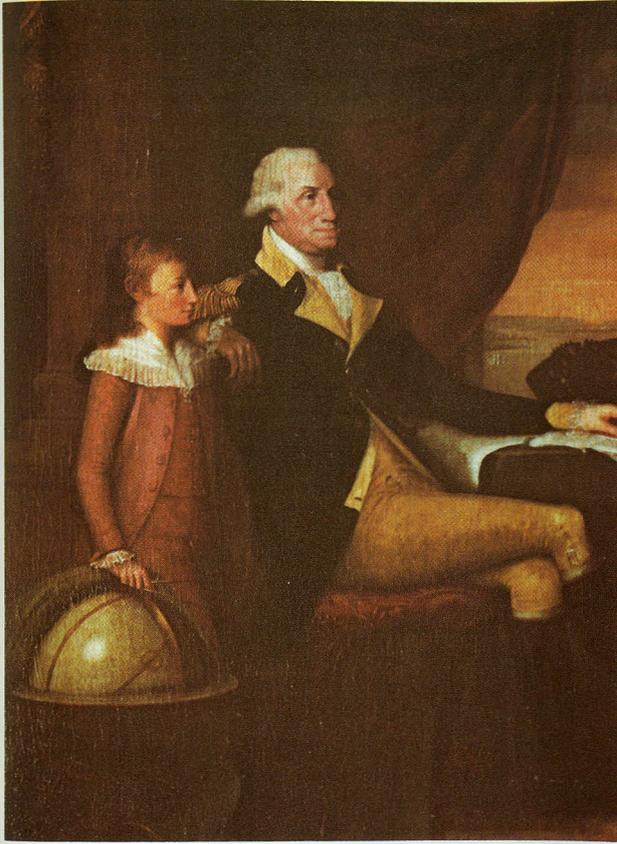
During his second stay, Washington had managed to keep public business at arm's length. He had arranged to receive communications wherever he might be, but elected to perform the duties of office in Philadelphia. Before Washington could unpack, the news of the Whiskey Rebellion, an insurrection by backwoods farmers in western Pennsylvania in protest against the enforcement of certain excise taxes, reached Germantown. On August 7, after meeting with Gov. Thomas Mifflin and the cabinet in Philadelphia, Washington issued a proclamation which ordered the insurgents to "disperse and retire to their respective abodes." Yet on the whole, a peaceful mood prevailed in Germantown. Between conferences and negotiations, Washington found time to advise his "dear Betsy," his granddaughter Elizabeth Parke Custis, not to "look for perfect felicity before you consent to wed. Nor conceive, from the fine tales the Poets and lovers of old have told us, of the transports of mutual love, that heaven has taken its abode on earth . . . love is too dainty a thing to live upon *alone*."

### The Later Years

Colonel Franks and his family lived in this house until 1802, when he sold it to Elliston and John Perot, Philadelphia merchants, who used it as a country place. When Elliston Perot died in 1834, the house was sold again, this time to Samuel B. Morris, a son-in-law and merchant. The house remained in the Morris family until willed to the United States by Marriott C. Morris. His son, Elliston B. Morris, confirmed the bequest in 1948.

Above right: The Washington family, painted by Edward Savage in 1789.

Below, left to right:  
Washington's cabinet in 1793;  
Alexander Hamilton, Thomas Jefferson,  
Edmund Randolph, Henry Knox.



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### "A Cabinet Of Able Coadjutors"

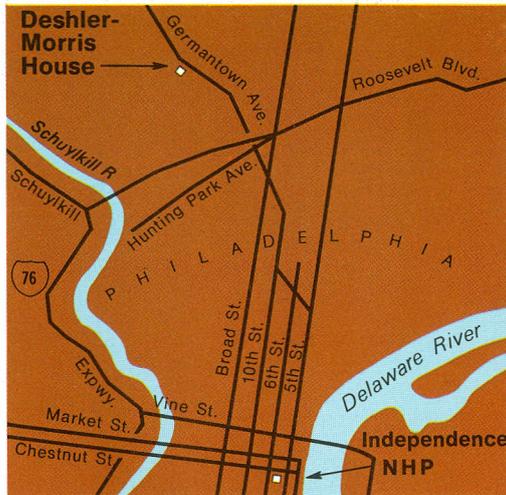
Washington once congratulated himself that in his cabinet he was "supported by able Coadjutors, who harmonize extremely well together." But by 1793 the two great adversaries of the early Republic, Secretary of State Thomas Jefferson and Secretary of the Treasury Alexander Hamilton, were locked in controversy, often of a personal nature, over basic constitutional and political issues. Jefferson was frequently supported by Attorney General Edmund Randolph, and Hamilton found a ready ally in Secretary of War Henry Knox. While Knox stood fast, Randolph tried to steer an independent course, leaving the Cabinet divided, as Jefferson put it, 2½ to 1½ and giving "the shells to him and the oysters to Hamilton." Before little more than a year had passed in Washington's second administration, three of the four secretaries resigned, and his coalition cabinet was near the point of dissolution.

William Maclay, Senator from Pennsylvania, saw three of the Cabinet in this light:

**Hamilton has a very boyish and giddy manner . . . Jefferson transgresses on the extreme of stiff gentility or lofty gravity. Knox is the easiest man and has the most dignity of presence.**

Now in his 39th year, Hamilton was of "small stature and lean . . . of a clear and strong judgment . . . convincing, and engaging in his eloquence," but impetuous. Jefferson at 50 was tall and well-proportioned, uncontentious but a dogged upholder of principle. Knox, whom Jefferson called "the shadow of Hamilton," was at 43 a portly giant. If in the Cabinet he was largely a follower, he nevertheless championed military preparedness on his own initiative. The scholarly and statesmanlike Randolph, just turned 40, impressed everyone with his "most harmonious voice . . . fine person and striking manners." But his scruples and his nonpartisanship amid the overheated politics of the times earned him little appreciation among his colleagues.

Washington at 61 presented to view the "mild philosophic gravity of expression" so well defined in his portraits. One contemporary noted a "circumspection . . . accompanied by discernment and penetration . . . from the judicious choice he has made of persons to fill public stations, he possesses the two great requisites of a statesman, the faculty of concealing his own sentiments and of discovering those of other men."



### About Your Visit

The Deshler-Morris House is located at 5442 Germantown Avenue, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, approximately 11 kilometers (7 miles) from Independence National Historical Park. The site may be reached either by automobile (metered parking) or by public transportation: Bus # 23 from the center city or from the park.

### For Your Safety

Do not allow your visit to be spoiled by an accident. While every effort has been made to provide for your safety, there are still hazards which require your alertness and vigilance.



**National Park Service  
U.S. Department of the Interior**

## Administration

The Deshler-Morris House is administered by the National Park Service, U.S. Department of the Interior, as a unit of Independence National Historical Park. It is maintained and operated by the Germantown Historical Society under the terms of a cooperative agreement. Inquiries may be addressed to the Superintendent, Independence National Historical Park, 313 Walnut Street, Philadelphia, PA 19106.

As the Nation's principal conservation agency, the Department of the Interior has responsibility for most of our nationally owned public lands and natural resources. This includes fostering the wisest use of our land and water resources, protecting our fish and wildlife, preserving the environmental and cultural values of our national parks and historical places, and providing for the enjoyment of life through outdoor recreation. The Department assesses our energy and mineral resources and works to assure that their development is in the best interests of all our people. The Department also has a major responsibility for American Indian reservation communities and for people who live in Island Territories under U.S. administration.



Cover rendering by Lynn Gallagher